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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 001849

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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN, INR/B, AND INR/IAA/HOFFMAN

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SUBJECT: FEDERICO ANTONIO HUMBERT ARIAS TO BE NEXT
PANAMANIAN AMBASSADOR TO THE US

REF: A. PANAMA 0896

[1](#)B. PANAMA 1537

Classified By: Ambassador Linda E. Watt for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary: Torrijos assigns a friend to Washington

[1](#)1. (C) President-elect Martin Torrijos has selected Federico "Freddy" Antonio Humbert Arias to be Panama's Ambassador to the United States as of September 1, 2004, but has not yet announced the appointment. Foreign Minister-designate Samuel Lewis Navarro told DCM that he already approached Foreign Minister Harmodio Arias about requesting agreement from Washington. Humbert was President of the Board of Directors of La Prensa, one of Panama's best-selling dailies, from March 2001 until July 2004. The US-educated Humbert is also President of the Panamanian Trucking Company and runs a profitable shrimp fishing business based in the port of Vacamonte (about a 30 minutes by car southwest of Panama City). As Ambassador, Humbert would take a pro-US stance, following President-elect Torrijos lead in pursuing points of convergence in our relations, particularly in security and economic matters. End Summary.

"Generational Change" in U.S.-Panama Relations

[1](#)2. (C) During a July 12 meeting with Ambassador Watt, Ambassador-designate Humbert said the U.S. could expect a "generational change" in the new government's approach to bilateral issues. He said that President-elect Torrijos and Foreign Minister-designate Samuel Lewis Navarro were both committed to looking forward in the relationship and would be seeking ways to advance what they believe are key converging interests between Panama and the United States. Humbert said he had instructions from Lewis to pursue a coherent and constructive policy with the US, which means closer coordination on issues between Panama's three key envoys -- Humbert, their OAS Ambassador (still to be named), and their UN Permrep (unofficially known to be former Ambassador to the U.S. Ricardo Alberto Arias). In this regard, Ambassador Watt stressed the importance of Panama pursuing a more constructive policy in the UN by avoiding knee-jerk votes with G-77 countries, particularly on complex and delicate Middle East issues. Humbert took the point and also pledged that the new government would work even more closely than the current administration on matters of mutual interest such as security, law enforcement, trade and investment.

Humbert's Personal background

[1](#)3. (SBU) Federico Antonio Humbert Arias is one of five siblings. He is married to Daphne Rusodimos de Humbert and the couple has four children. Humbert attended the Catholic Colegio La Salle during high school and obtained a Bachelors in Business Administration from Notre Dame University.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Humbert's father, Federico Humbert Azcarraga, Jr., also a Notre Dame graduate, was the first individual businessman to sign the USDOC-sponsored Panamanian Business Ethics Compact (Pacto Etico Empresarial) because most Panamanians consider him above reproach. The elder Humbert, one of Panama's foremost philanthropists and a generous donor to local charities, was a leader of the National Civic Crusade efforts to persuade dictator Manuel Noriega to leave Panama during the difficult period 1986-89. President of Banco General, the elder Humbert is also a longtime supporter (both financially and managerially) of the former Christian Democratic Party (now the Popular Party (PP), that allied with Martin Torrijos' Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) for the May 2004 elections). Ambassador-designate Humbert's

cousin is former Panama City Mayor (1989-90) and PP activist Guillermo "Willy" Cochez, who is rumored to be a possible candidate as OAS Ambassador.

Humbert at work

15. (C) Though not a politician himself, Ambassador-designate Humbert (unlike his father) has a reputation as a hard-nosed businessman who is not above using political connections with whoever happens to be in government to gain an advantage over his competitors. For instance, long-standing Greek-Panamanian businesses owned by the Limberopolous and Papadimitriu families have accused Humbert of using his influence with Maritime Authority Director Bertilda Garcia. Garcia's father Augusto "Onassis" Garcia (currently a close advisor to President Moscoso) has recently tried to elbow his way into the shrimp fishing industry. Ironically, Noriega cronies used similar tactics against the elder Humbert in the late 1980s, threatening to foreclose on fishermen's outstanding National Bank of Panama loans if the fisherman continued to do business with Humbert. In the run-up to Panama's May 2 elections, Humbert and La Prensa board member Ricardo Alberto Arias played a key role in blocking publication of information regarding a potentially damaging article that Torrijos' opponents tried to air during the campaign. (See Reftel A).

Humbert and Torrijos

16. (C) Humbert's political ties with Torrijos have been based more on friendship than any party affiliation. (NOTE: Humbert told the Ambassador that he was initially skeptical of Torrijos, having opposed the PRD-military alliance in the 70s and 80s; however, Humbert said Torrijos' commitment to changing business-as-usual in Panama had persuaded him to support Torrijos' bid for the presidency. END NOTE.) For instance, Humbert supported Torrijos' 1999 campaign for President as leader of a group called the "Independents For Martin Torrijos." Sources close to President-elect Torrijos have told Emboffs that he selected Humbert to be his Ambassador to the United States because he is young and energetic, plus has strong connections with the U.S. media and international organizations -- all of which the Torrijos team feels will make Humbert good at networking Washington's various power centers (the Hill, key lobbies, etc.). Overall, Humbert appears committed to acting as a strong advocate for Panama's interests in a manner consistent with Torrijos' desire to forge an even closer relationship with the United States centered on mutual security and economic interests.

WATT